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Julia L. Frengs

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [jfrengs2@unl.edu](mailto:jfrengs2@unl.edu)

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# Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 39

Issue 2 *Testimonies of Environmental Injustice in the  
Global South*

Article 5


1-1-2015

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Julia L. Frengs

Quest University Canada, julialynne2011@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Frengs, Julia L. (2015) "Anticipatory Testimonies: Environmental Disaster in Claudine Jacques's Fictional Prophecies," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1840>

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# Anticipatory Testimonies: Environmental Disaster in Claudine Jacques's Fictional Prophecies

## Abstract

In Caledonian author Claudine Jacques's 2002 novel *L'Âge du perroquet-banane, Parabole païenne*, a tribal elder warns a man "from elsewhere": "in our country, if you remove a taboo bone, you disrupt the sea, if you touch it without respect you invite a cyclone, if you toss the bones of our elders you provoke a...tidal wave" (54).

Although this work is set in a futuristic world after an ambiguous "Great Disaster" on an unnamed Oceanic island, the author manages to allegorically recount the history of the environmental atrocities attributed to the earth's human occupants that have transformed the present reality of the Oceanic region.

This essay considers Claudine Jacques's *L'Âge du perroquet-banane, Parabole païenne*, as well as her novel *Nouméa Mangrove* (2010), as anticipatory testimonies. Both works of fiction call into question the very real violations of environmental human rights facing the diverse ethnic communities of the sui generis collectivity of New Caledonia: nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean, pollution from the nickel mining industry, and the depletion of natural resources. This essay demonstrates how Jacques's works engage in environmentalism by bearing witness to and challenging environmental injustices in New Caledonia in particular, and on a broader scale, in the French-speaking Oceanic region.

## Keywords

Claudine Jacques, New Caledonia, Oceania, Kanak, nickel, prophecy, testimony, environmentalism

Anticipatory Testimonies:  
Environmental Disaster in Claudine Jacques's Fictional Prophecies

Julia Frengs  
*Quest University Canada*

*If colonial and capitalist expansion has both accentuated social inequalities and signaled a precipitous fall in ecological wisdom, an alternative ecology must rest on an alternate society and polity as well.*

—Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier,  
*Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (101)

The words of ancient Greek poet Pindar announce an ecological catastrophe in the epigraph to Caledonian writer Claudine Jacques's first chapter of *L'Âge du perroquet-banane, Parabole païenne* ('The Age of the Parrotfish, Pagan Parable'). The poet evokes the ruin of harvests, an inundation of the sea, a freeze of the soil, and subsequently questions an "eclipse": "Vas-tu inonder la terre et renouveler l'humanité en faisant naître une nouvelle race?" (11) 'Are you going to inundate the earth and renew humanity with the birth of a new race?'<sup>1</sup> Jacques's choice of epigraph essentially questions the need for a new or alternate society that would potentially treat the earth, human and non-human populations alike, with more respect than do its current inhabitants. Guha and Martinez-Alier suggest in the above epigraph excerpted from *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*, which refers to Indian environmental movements, that aiming to remove control of nature from the industrial sector and restore it to the hands of those in rural communities who physically inhabit the environment in question would provide a more appropriate approach to environmental politics. Jacques seems to ponder a similar rearrangement of environmental control in both her 2002 dystopian fiction *L'Âge du Perroquet-banane* and *Nouméa mangrove*, a dark detective novel published in 2010. This essay considers both works of fiction as prophetic, anticipatory, or hypothetical testimonies: imaginative novels that nonetheless call into question the very real violations of environmental human rights facing the diverse ethnic communities of the *sui generis* collectivity of New Caledonia.<sup>2</sup> As critic Dominique Jouve remarks, the rule of the novel of anticipation is to present, in a fictional future, the stylized tendencies of our present tense, allowing us to better understand the motivations that animate the present (n.pag.). I intend to demonstrate that Jacques's fictional works can be considered environmentally engaged testimonies that act as prophecies, as they bear witness to and challenge recent environmental injustices in New Caledonia in particular, and on a broader, more global scale, in the Oceanic region.

Although originally conceptualized as a genre of non-fictional literature that provides a space for marginalized voices to correct or contest those of the (colonial) center, testimonial literature, whether an “authentic” narrative told by a true-to-life witness, or a fictionalized version of testimony, maintains several consistent characteristics. George Yúdice defines testimonial literature as an “authentic narrative” recounted by a witness: “Emphasizing *popular oral discourse*, the witness portrays his or her own *experience* as a *representative* of a *collective memory* and *identity*. *Truth* is summoned in the cause of *denouncing* a present situation of exploitation and oppression or *exorcising* and *setting aright* official history” (qtd. in Gugelberger 4, emphasis in original). The testimonial genre is based on the act (by an individual or a group of people) of breaking silences and unveiling truths on behalf of others in the same situation; it includes a vision of the future that will break with an oppressive past and provides a corrective to and a critique of official historical accounts. Claudine Jacques’s novels, including many of those not considered in this study, bear witness to history in an alternative, fictional mode by including factual historical references and citations from well-known Kanak (autochthonous New Caledonian) and Caledonian political figures within the fictional narrative. They provide rather unconventional testimonies of very real environmental violence (or what Rob Nixon has termed “slow violence”) that has occurred and continues to occur in Oceania, and more specifically in New Caledonia. As Nixon remarks regarding writer-activists:

In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (15)

In a similar vein, eighteen years prior to Nixon’s work, Edward Said remarked in *Culture and Imperialism*: “For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. . . . Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through imagination” (77). Jacques’s literature, an amalgam representing various cultures and ethnicities living in New Caledonia, demonstrates the extent to which all of these diverse peoples are attached to the land in an immutable manner.<sup>3</sup> She challenges the “habits that downplay slow violence” and “recovers” the land

through imaginative fictions characterized by an insistence on an attachment to the land. Particularly with regard to ecological concerns that affect the communities in Oceania, these fictions render otherwise imperceptible violence visible. Jacques's use of the detective genre combined with omniscient narrators in *Nouméa mangrove* allows fictional characters of various ethnic backgrounds to provide testimonies, leading the detective hero to the discovery of contaminated waters in the capital city of Nouméa. Both imaginative novels examined in this essay question truth and attempt to expose exploitative practices that have damaged the environment, affected, and in many cases displaced, autochthonous communities of Oceania, and marked the history of New Caledonia.<sup>4</sup>

New Caledonia, consisting of the main island of Grande Terre, the Loyalty Islands, the Isle of Pines, the Belep archipelago, and several other small islands and islets, is situated roughly 1,500 km from the east coast of Australia in what is considered the Melanesian area of Oceania. It is arguably one of the most prosperous economies of the region due to its position as the world's third largest nickel producer: New Caledonia possesses nearly one third of the world's reserves of nickel ore. Despite its relatively robust export economy, the indigenous populations of the territory, the Kanak people, rarely benefit from their islands' mineral wealth, and often suffer from the environmental degradation caused by the nickel mining industry. As Kanak author and activist Déwé Gorodé indicates in her poem "Au Pays du Roi Nick" ('In the Land of King Nick'), it is the "golden boys de la jet-set locale et internationale" (*Sharing* 160-61) 'golden boys of the local and international jet-sets' who profit from this mining fortune:

et oublier ainsi  
les conditions de vie  
de tous ceux qui font vivre  
le roi Nick et sa cour  
le nickel et son cours  
au pays du roi Nick. (*Sharing* 160)

and so forget  
how the other half lives  
all those they live off  
King Nick and his Wall St. nickel-dollar court  
in the Land of King Nick.

Along with Kanak playwright Pierre Gope, deceased politician and independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, and various other Kanak writers and activists, Gorodé has vehemently critiqued the French colonial endeavor to seize the lands of the Kanak clans of New Caledonia, which began in 1853 when

France annexed the territory intending to use it as a penal colony. The Kanak populations were subjected to the policy of *cantonnement*, a reserve system in which French colonists progressively seized fertile lands and displaced the autochthonous population to infertile areas. Until 1946, the Kanak population was also subjected to the regime of the *indigénat*, a set of laws that imposed administrative demands, chores, mandatory labor, and repressive measures (they were prohibited from leaving the reserves without authorization, for example). The discovery of nickel in the islands increased European settlement in the territory, and in 1880 the Société Le Nickel, even now run principally by Europeans or Caledonians of European descent, was formed. A second nickel boom in the 1960s and 70s attracted further European immigrants and enticed neighboring Polynesians seeking opportunities in the increasingly globalized Oceanic region to immigrate to the archipelago. Not surprisingly, the period following the nickel boom saw a more radicalized Kanak politics, leading to the turbulent, politically and racially polarizing decade of the 1980s now referred to as *les Événements* ‘The Events.’ The period culminated in 1988 with the Matignon Accords, an agreement that established a ten-year period of development in which institutional and economic provisions were made for the Kanak community and included the (partial) restitution of Kanak lands. Yet, significantly, the Matignon Accords divided the territory into three provinces: the province des Îles, which includes the Loyalty Islands; the province Nord, composed of principally indigenous Kanak communities; and the province Sud, where the capital city of Nouméa is located (and where the population of European descent is concentrated). Despite intense Kanak resistance during the 1980s, many clans were persuaded to cede their lands, lured by job prospects from within the nickel mining industry or by generous offers from companies seeking profit from nickel-rich Kanak-owned lands.

The nickel mining industry has continued to divide the communities that are attempting to fulfill a “common destiny” proposed in the 1998 Nouméa Accords, and is often the object of critique in the works of Kanak as well as Caledonian writers.<sup>5</sup> Pierre Gope’s 2001 play, *Le dernier crépuscule* (*The Last Nightfall*) centers on a debate among the elders of a Kanak tribe who are approached by a young Kanak government official with an offer to purchase and displace their village, as it sits atop nickel ore. In Gope’s play, “developed men,” technology, and the usurpation of land at the expense of Kanak clans are associated with “Whitey” and the colonial mechanism. Toward the end of the play, when a youth insists that technology is a basic necessity for survival in today’s world, the elder Pa Sake blames technology for the downward spiral into which he views his country slipping: “Sure, which necessitates perdition for our children, pollution, corruption for our High Chiefs and politicians... The entire world is rotted by technology” (75). Despite arguments citing the need to preserve

Kanak tradition, ancestral grounds, and environmental concerns from the clan's elders, the chief agrees to sell the land and move the village to a location of the government's choosing: the human costs of not doing so are too great. Gope demonstrates the conundrum many indigenous populations face as technology and "development" provide economically lucrative yet environmentally destructive options for their futures as forced participants in an increasingly globalized society.

A year following the first performances of Gope's play, Claudine Jacques's hypothetical dystopian novel *L'Âge du perroquet-banane*, *Parabole païenne* was published, evoking similar imagery of the nickel mining industry's takeover of Kanak lands, the autochthonous population's internal struggle over whether to cede those lands, and the subsequent environmental catastrophe that ensues. The novel takes place in the year 2028, ten years after an ambiguous "Grand désordre" 'Great Disaster.' The diegesis unfolds in an apocalyptic "Monde gris" 'gray world' surrounded by the "relents putrides de l'océan de fange brune" (38) 'putrid stench of the ocean of brown mire' and principally follows the perspective of an elderly female librarian, known only as "la bibliothécaire" 'the librarian,' who is part of a group of nine sages occupying an old library, hoping for the "bleu" 'blue' or the "lumière" 'light' to return. The sages, or the "Gardiens de la mémoire" 'Guardians of memory,' guard the precious remaining books, the only links to the island's collective memory, and inscribe the dreams and testimonies of the majority of the remaining population, the "Êtres sans mémoire" 'Beings without memory,' daily in order to assess whether they might be approaching a return of memory (or "light"). The past is thus continually evoked in this novel situated in the future, creating an almost palpable tension in the author's account of recent Caledonian history.<sup>6</sup> The "Beings without memory" are separated into three groups, mirroring the present-day division of the territory into three provinces. In the mountains reside the cannibalistic and often incestuous followers of "l'Homme féroce" 'the Ferocious Man,' while in the valleys roam "les femmes sauvages" 'savage or wild women,' a group of women and children who fearfully hide from the men who habitually capture and rape them, and underground live the brainwashed followers of the obese leader of "la Secte des plumes" 'the Sect of the Feathers,' who surface to steal chickens and other birds from the sages in the library. The children born to the "savage women" are often deformed, only slightly resembling human beings, "dues aux sols contaminés, aux gaz qui s'en échappent" (23) 'due to the contaminated soils, to the gases that escape from them.'<sup>7</sup>

As 2018, the year of the "Great Disaster," is the set date for the final referendum on independence for Kanaky/New Caledonia, Dominique Jouve suggests that a simple interpretation of the chosen future dates for the novel could be that the "gray world" is the representation of the isolation and separation from



Europe (as well as other Oceanic islands) that might result from such independence. Or, Jouve continues, the “Great Disaster” could equally be interpreted as an ecological catastrophe that punishes human beings for their violence toward nature and the societies of the Pacific (n.pag.). Effectively, the author links political instability regarding territorial arguments with environmental catastrophe by informing us that the land is not ours over which to argue, and anticipates that human beings are on a path to the destruction of both the land and the culture with which the land is indelibly linked. The destruction of the land initiates the loss of memory, except for that of the elite few who reside in the library guarding the knowledge (books) and the collective memory (through oral storytelling) of the island. As the editors of *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* remark, the land becomes a crucial recuperative site of postcolonial historiography, since colonial powers tend to conceal the history of their own violence. Essentially, they note, the land is the “only true guardian” of the past, which “makes the process of conservation and sustainability all the more ontologically powerful, because a gesture of destruction against land, then, simultaneously becomes an act of violence against collective memory” (DeLoughrey and Handley 8). Jacques’s “Beings without memory” cannot recall the colonial violence done to the populations or the lands of Oceania, nor the attempted steps toward reconciliation amongst the various communities. Throughout the novel, the “Guardians of memory” disappear one by one, and “L’Auteur inconnu” ‘The Unknown Author’ reports to the librarian near the end of the novel: “J’ai tourné, hier, la dernière page de notre livre. Il n’y a plus de place pour écrire. . . . Nous sommes à la fin de notre histoire. Tout a été dit. Je dois cacher le livre sacré” (214) ‘Yesterday I turned the last page of our book. There is no more room to write. . . . We’re at the end of our history. Everything has been said. I must hide the sacred book.’ Via the ‘Unknown Author,’ Jacques associates the end of the era and the destruction of the earth with the tragedy of the demise of intellectual pursuits and collective memory.

Like Pierre Gope, Jacques insinuates that the nickel mining industry is at fault for the environmental destruction and for the increased divisions among societies in the New Caledonian archipelago. In chapter 6, Euclid, a “Being without memory,” insists that he now remembers witnessing the noise of the giant wave and the gushing of the water on the day of the “Great Disaster” ten years earlier. He recalls that he was working at the mines, with a view of the changing scenery down below: “En bas, il y avait un grand chantier. Des centaines d’hommes y travaillaient, le paysage changeait jour après jour, à chaque pelletée, à chaque effort, transformant les reliefs en plats, les chemins en routes....” (53) ‘Down below, there was a huge construction site. Hundreds of men worked there, the landscape changed day after day, with every shovelful, with every effort, transforming the hills into flatlands, the paths into roadways....’ Euclid reports

that the workers began grumbling, as at least one man per day was dying during the construction process, yet “Personne n’osait en parler. On gagnait beaucoup d’argent” (54) ‘No one dared speak about it. We were making a lot of money.’ Finally, Euclid says, the workers refused to continue construction upon being asked to cut down the taboo banyan trees. To resume the work, the mining industry executives brought in foreign workers. Euclid informs the sages: “C’est là que tout a basculé. L’eau des sources est devenue rouge, rouge comme la sève des sang-dragons” (54) ‘That’s when everything began to fall apart. The spring water turned red, red like dragon’s blood sap.’ He then tells the sages that a “coutumier” ‘tribal elder’ had warned the company: “attention à toi, l’homme venu d’ailleurs, chez nous, si tu déterres un os tabou, tu rends la mer houleuse, si tu le touches sans respect tu appelles un cyclone, si tu jettes les os de nos vieux, tu provoques un...raz-de-marée” (54) ‘Listen, man come from elsewhere, here, if you unearth a sacred bone, you render the sea turbulent, if you touch it without respect you summon a cyclone, if you throw out the bones of our ancestors, you provoke a...tidal wave.’

The ‘Being without memory,’ who describes his work in the mines as having been a part of ‘organized crime’ trails off, unable to name the mine or even his family members, as all he can recall is the mud, the noise, and the “soleil qui tombe et se noie” (55) ‘falling, drowning sun.’ Euclid’s eyewitness account of the environmental destruction and irreverence toward indigenous tradition on the part of the mining industry confirms one of the sage’s suspicions about the cause of the catastrophe that brought on the “gray world”: “Voici l’explication que j’attendais. Les tabous ont été profanés” (56) ‘That is the explanation I was waiting for. The taboos were profaned.’<sup>8</sup> Euclid’s testimony, and the sage’s satisfaction with the explanation that the profanation of indigenous taboos must be the cause of the ecological catastrophe that has transformed the island, recall Kanak tradition. In Kanak societies, while communities linguistically and culturally differ from region to region (there are 28 Melanesian languages currently spoken in New Caledonia), each Kanak group has in common the fact that the genealogical itineraries of their clans are inscribed in the landscape. Bénéla Houmbouy explains: “it is difficult for a Kanak to speak of identity without specifying the bonds which connect him to the *tertre* where his ancestors were buried, or to the tree beside which he put his hut, as well as to Nature in general...” (in Sinclair-Reynolds 123).<sup>9</sup> In the Kanak clan system, each clan is named after its *tertre* ‘mound’ of origin, and divided into different lineages. Additionally, similar to practices in French Polynesia, after giving birth it is customary for Kanak women to bury the umbilical cord close to a tree, located in proximity to the child’s birthplace. Ancestors are buried in the ground near their family’s home, and their souls are said to remain with the earth and their people, as clan chiefs communicate with the spirits of the ancestors. Identity, from birth

until after death, is thus derived from the topography, not only because Kanak bodies share with the land an eternal resting place, but also because they share their names. As celebrated independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou explains “modern” Melanesians in *La Présence kanak* (‘Kanak Existence’): “*Nous ne sommes pas des hommes d’ailleurs. Nous sommes des hommes sortis de cette terre*” (104; emphasis in original) ‘*We are not men from elsewhere. We are men come out of this earth.*’ Removing the taboo bones thus symbolically effaces—or disinters—the genealogy inscribed upon the landscape, provoking the anger of the ancestral spirits and, in Jacques’s fiction, the environmental disaster that renders the majority of the population amnesiac.<sup>10</sup>

The elder’s protests and warnings regarding the displacement of the ancestral cemetery in *L’Âge du perroquet-banane* reflect the true-to-life arguments of several Kanak communities when faced with the prospects of nickel-mining projects on their lands. In an article entitled “Perceptions of Nature and Responses to Environmental Degradation in New Caledonia,” Leah Horowitz notes that many Kanak consider environmental degradation as indistinguishable from the devastation of their cultural heritage and as an attack on themselves as a people. They denounce the ecological degradation brought about by the mining projects as destructive forces of the West (246). On the other hand, as Horowitz notes in another study, the clans may not be completely averse to nickel mining, provided the clan benefits economically, the industry properly addresses Kanak custom to acknowledge the sacred link of the Kanak people to the land, and clan chiefs perform the ceremonial traditions of asking the ancestors for their permission. As Guha and Martinez-Alier remark in the introduction to *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*, poor countries and poor individuals are not necessarily interested in the protection of wild species or natural habitats, as environmentalists in the West tend to be, but rather they “do respond to environmental destruction which directly affects their way of life and prospects for survival” (xx). Mirroring this type of response, as Jacques’s fictional Euclid states, the indigenous population involved in the mining project did not dare protest initially, as they were making good money, yet once they perceived a threat to their ancestral culture, identity, and prospects for survival, they refused to continue. In *L’Âge du perroquet-banane*, Jacques insinuates that both environmental and cultural destruction will ensue from the incessant mining projects overtaking the mainland of New Caledonia, since the (anticipated) environmental disaster of 2018 occasions a loss of collective memory.

If in *L’Âge du perroquet-banane*, Claudine Jacques depicts environmental destruction as analogous to violence against collective memory, in *Nouméa mangrove* she further engages in the discussion of “postcolonial ecologies” when she warns us of another extreme: deep ecology. Deep ecologists tend to prioritize the environment over all human needs, and in privileging biocentrism over

anthropocentrism, seem unconcerned with inequalities within human society itself, specifically with regard to first-occupant clans. Jacques's detective novel creatively mirrors Ramachandra Guha's warning that "Specious nonsense about the equal rights of all species cannot hide the plain fact that green imperialists are possibly as dangerous and certainly more hypocritical than their economic or religious counterparts" (107). In Jacques's novel of interlaced narratives, marginalized youths on the outskirts of Nouméa face violence in the shantytowns, where a "Miss Sunshine" dressed only in white will sleep with men for cans of milk, a Don Juan-esque police detective falls in love with the wife of a murdered eco-terrorist, and a young nurse becomes completely entrapped in the sexual exploitations of a dangerous *broussard* 'bushman.'<sup>11</sup> The author introduces the novel with a poem, likewise entitled "Nouméa Mangrove," that describes the trajectory of a source of water from a river in the suburbs of Nouméa, to a canal, to a mangrove, and finally a lake bordering the cemetery in which a large part of the action of the novel takes place. The poem itself functions as a prophecy. Jacques foreshadows the poisoning of the water sources at its conclusion, as she describes the ubiquity of the water: "Partout elle [l'eau] renifle, respire, souffle, pantelle, avale, halète, bruit, bourdonne, claque, siffle, soupire et gémit, *vacarme silencieux dans le tumulte de la ville*" (7; emphasis in bold in the original) 'Everywhere it [the water] sniffs, breathes, puffs, pants, swallows, gasps, murmurs, hums, slaps, whistles, sighs and groans, *silent racket in the commotion of the city.*' The water adopts life-like characteristics as it serpentine throughout the city, surreptitiously reminding the reader that all environments and constituents are interrelated. Well before a character suggests in the latter chapters of the novel that believers in deep ecology endorse eco-terrorism, Jacques provides a type of corrective to the essentialism of deep ecology through a depiction of the unavoidable interconnections between the natural environment and the man-made city.

In the first two chapters of *Nouméa mangrove*, Jacques further accentuates the interconnectedness of the environment with the earth's human occupants, placing particular emphasis on the effects of increased city construction on the marginalized youth of the island. Ruddy, a young Rasta unsure of his future, begins living and working in the fields on the outskirts of Nouméa, living off of crab, fish and wild plants, but an ecological "apocalypse" pushes him to move to the city: "Bouleversé, le paysage se modifia. Il vit la terre se fendiller, puis se fendre, se morceler comme après une grande sécheresse. Les oiseaux s'envolèrent ainsi que les guêpes et les essaims d'abeilles. Il entendit le cri des arbres qu'on arrache" (24) 'Shattered, the landscape changed. He saw the earth crack, then split, break up like after a long drought. The birds took off, as well as the wasps and the swarms of bees. He heard the cry of the trees being torn out.' In the narrative "reality," it is the construction of a toll road that chases Ruddy toward

the city. Jacques evokes a disaster, although on a smaller scale than that portrayed in *L'Âge du perroquet-banane*, demonstrating that environmental violations inevitably affect the humans living on the land and refuting a dualistic conception that separates the environment from the human. In chapter 8, the author similarly insists upon the interconnections between the environment and its human occupants when she depicts a meeting of the chamber of agriculture, allowing characters from either side of the debate to argue over the increased use of pesticides in the country. While the city officials overseeing veterinary, nutrition, and rural affairs attempt to impose limits on the maximum amount of pesticides a farmer can legally utilize, the farmers lament climate change, insect damage, imports from France and other European countries, and storage difficulties that have threatened their agricultural production and in turn provoke a greater need for pesticides. In a short testimony to a friend, one farmer recalls a series of floods that ruined the previous year's harvest and laments this year's 'sick' orange and lemon crops. His hopes for better revenue for this year's potato crops, on which he counts to help him get back on his feet, are dashed when the OCEF (Office de Commercialisation et d'Entreposage Frigorifique 'Office for Marketing and Frozen Storage', the entity governing the marketing and storage of goods in New Caledonia) will not allow him to sell the potatoes due to his 'overuse' of pesticides (45-46). Jacques here demonstrates that despite good intentions, hypersensitivity to the use of pesticides has in fact placed New Caledonia's farmers in a precarious situation.

As the novel progresses and Jacques introduces us to the interweaving mini-narratives that finally culminate in an over-arching master plot, she reminds us that while protecting the environment is necessary (after all, humans are animals, as well), there are human costs to extreme environmentalism. Detective Joseph Vinimo slowly uncovers the plans of ecological conspirators to poison the water system of Nouméa as a form of protest against increased industrialization. When an investigation suggests that a murdered man was forced to ingest pesticides, Vinimo becomes involved in the investigation of multiple murders traversing the city of Nouméa, including that of the Goro Nickel plant engineer Philippe Cartier.<sup>12</sup> Vinimo learns that the Canadian Cartier was not only involved in a group called "Les Guerriers de la Terre" 'Warriors of Earth,' a group whose mission is to protect the planet, but in fact his involvement went even further. Cartier was a member of the "Front de Libération de la Terre" or the 'Earth Liberation Front,' believers in deep ecology, and as another character explains to Vinimo: "La *deep ecology* prône l'écoterrorisme" (262) 'Deep ecology advocates eco-terrorism.' Vinimo discovers that the ecologically engaged engineer was in fact an ecoterrorist, whose plan succeeded because he was paying a poor "métis sans coutume, sans terre, sans loi, que rien n'effarouchait" (17) 'mixed-race boy without custom, without land, without law, whom nothing frightened' to poison

the reservoirs of Nouméa, triggering an epidemic of catastrophic proportions. At the end of the novel, Vinimo learns that thousands of liters of sulfuric acid have been overturned into the creek near the Goro site, killing fish, shrimp, and many other living organisms. Upon hearing the news, Vinimo knows that “le temps de la terreur était arrivé” (262) ‘the era of *terror* had arrived,’ and, referencing Dante, he murmurs: “Nous entrons dans le vestibule de l’enfer” (296) ‘We enter into the vestibule of hell.’ Vinimo’s declaration is strikingly similar to the ‘Guardian of Legends’ announcement of the changing era in Jacques’s earlier novel: “Nous entrons aujourd’hui dans l’Âge du perroquet-banane!” (167) ‘Today we enter into the Age of the Parrotfish!’ These common prophetic assertions contribute to the anticipatory nature of the testimonies portrayed in both novels. Indeed, *Nouméa mangrove*’s prophetic tone is emphasized by the references to Dante’s *Inferno* throughout the novel: each section begins with an epigraph taken from the epic poem, culminating with a final warning: “Vous qui entrez, laissez toute espérance” (Dante, Canto II, in *Nouméa* 245) ‘Abandon every hope, you who enter’ (Alighieri 55).

The prophetic tone of *L’Âge du perroquet-banane* is further accentuated by its title, the evocative use of the word ‘age’ or ‘era’ indicating the beginning of a new or future period of time. In fact, it is interesting to consider the choice of titles for both of Jacques’s novels, especially in a discussion of environmental engagement. *L’Âge du perroquet-banane* begins with an epigraph excerpted from the work *Poissons de Polynésie* (‘Fish of Polynesia’) on the *perroquet-banane* ‘parrotfish’ (*Callyodon oviceps*), in which Jacques clarifies that she is referring to the gray-yellow fish that populates the waters of Oceania (rather than to the tropical bird). Following the description of the bicolored fish, she writes: “Et non / *Perroquet-banane: Oiseau exotique capable d’imiter des sons articulés*” (7) ‘And not / *parrot: exotic bird able to imitate pronounced sounds.*’ By making this distinction, she ensures that her reader understands that the plot unfolds specifically in Oceania, yet could refer to any Oceanic island (although throughout the text the reader recognizes New Caledonia as the model for this fictional future island). Significantly, due to habitat degradation and overexploitation, a species of parrotfish was added to the list of Species of Concern of the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service in 2004, two years following the publication of Jacques’s novel. As coral reef fish, parrotfish are particularly prone to ciguatera contamination, as they are exposed to ciguatoxins present in the algae they consume. Consequently, ciguatera fish poisoning occurs frequently in the Oceanic region. In fact, in a 2009 article in the *Journal of Biogeography*, Teina Rongo, Mark Bush, and Robert van Woesik postulate that ciguatera fish poisoning events prompted Polynesian voyages of necessity between AD 1000 and 1450, and hence the emigration of Polynesian islanders to other areas of Oceania, including New Zealand and Australia. While ciguatoxins

occur naturally in coral reef algae, environmental factors such as cyclones, coral bleaching, and rising ocean temperatures contribute to increased cases of ciguatera poisoning in Oceanic peoples. Fish consumption in the region has declined significantly in the past three decades, a factor that may have influenced Jacques's choice of title for her dystopic novel.

As opposed to the ambiguity of location in *L'Âge du perroquet-banane*, the title *Nouméa mangrove* situates the narrative and anchors the intrigue in the capital city of New Caledonia. Nouméa is frequently referred to as a "melting pot" of diversity, a city that is home to Caledonians, Kanaks, Indonesians, Polynesians, Asians, and numerous other ethnic and cultural groups. The second part of the title, mangrove, is also indicative of diversity. Mangrove forests have one foot on land and one in the sea: they are among the most dynamic and biologically complex ecosystems on Earth, home to birds, fish, snakes, and crocodiles. In addition to providing food for a variety of marine and land animals, they protect land from the erosive power of waves. Mangrove forests support an abundance of life, and may be more fundamental to the condition of the planet than scientists ever realized (Warne n.pag.). Mangroves are also highly symbolic in Antillean literature. Both Édouard Glissant and Maryse Condé have employed the image of the mangrove to represent rhizomatic relation (in Deleuzian terms): without beginning or end, irreducible to a single root, a fragile, tenuous series of relationships. In combining the two highly diverse milieus, both the city of Nouméa and the concept of the mangrove, Jacques emphasizes the importance of biodiversity and reinforces the idea that human, animal, and plant life are relational and interdependent. She stresses the need for a view of an ecological self, which Val Plumwood describes as "a type of relational self, one which includes the goal of the flourishing of earth others and the earth community among its own primary ends," rather than one that views nature as nonhuman, irrational, and therefore exploitable (154). Concurrently, Jacques also reminds the reader that not only environmental atrocities but also environmental extremism can threaten vulnerable, displaced communities. She encourages the reader to embrace what Glissant calls an "aesthetics of the earth": "The politics of ecology has implications for populations that are decimated or threatened with disappearance as a people. For, far from consenting to sacred intolerance, it is a driving force for the relational interdependence of all lands, of the whole Earth" (146). Jacques's *L'Âge du perroquet-banane* and *Nouméa mangrove* narrativize both Plumwood's theory of a relational, ecological self and Glissant's "aesthetics of the earth" through imaginative testimony to help the reader to think through the "slow violence" that plagues the environmentally dispossessed of the Oceanic region.

In conclusion, Claudine Jacques's environmentally engaged texts act as anticipatory testimonies of humans' relations to nature, and are figurative, yet

historically based, experiences of ecological disaster specific to the Oceanic region. Both novels call into question various colonial and neo-colonial practices that presently endanger the environment and, inevitably, the human populations that inhabit that environment. Jacques's texts are particularly poignant in a study of environmental engagement and testimonies of environmental disaster in the Global South, as the social divide between the rich and poor in New Caledonia may be very easily linked to the history of polarizing racial inequalities and a general tendency by agents of the global North to regard the lands previously owned by Kanak populations as available for appropriation. While the New Caledonian government has made significant strides toward greater equality among the races and classes by laying out common goals and adopting a more inclusive motto ("Terre de parole, terre de partage" 'Land of speech, land of sharing'), the history of displacement of the Kanak peoples, the erasure of more sustainable ways of life, the pervasive nickel mining industry, and other forms of environmental degradation have permanently marked and often threaten the communities. By leaving unnamed the island in *L'Âge du perroquet-banane*, Jacques allows for an ambiguous critique of an array of environmentally violent practices currently taking place in the region, from nickel mining, to overfishing, to climate change, even including less explicit references to the nuclear testing that took place in many areas of Oceania. In both novels, the author explores the links between imperialism, racism, resource exploitation, and environmental degradation. Through anticipatory testimonies describing the projected catastrophic consequences of economic exploitation, climate change, and the potential dangers of extreme biocentrism indicative of deep ecology, Jacques suggests that humans of all classes, races, ethnicities, and cultures are vulnerable. Situating her novels in the future (or in an ambiguous, hypothetical present) allows her to expose the weaknesses, the oversights, and the faults of the past and present, particularly concerning the treatment of the environment and the human communities in the Oceanic region. As the subtitle to *L'Âge du perroquet-banane*, *Parabole païenne* indicates, the novel serves as a parable, making use of prophetic imagery to illustrate a lesson to present-day readers. Likewise, the recurrent references to Dante's *Inferno* in *Nouméa mangrove* evoke allegorical imagery, according the detective novel a similarly prophetic dimension with regard to environmental disaster. Both novels interpellate present-day readers through prophecy, or through warnings of potential events that will provoke both human and environmental catastrophe. As Dante's descent into Hell enables him to identify and reject sin and therefore repent, Jacques suggests that there may still be time for humans to change the course of the environmentally catastrophic events she anticipates for the future.



## Notes

1. All translations of Jacques's texts, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
2. While *L'Âge du perroquet-banane* does explicitly take place in a fictional future, *Nouméa mangrove* is not situated with regard to specific dates and contains few historical markers that enable the reader to situate the novel temporally. Rather, the dark detective novel takes place in what the reader can only presume to be a fictional present. Nevertheless, I consider Jacques's *Nouméa mangrove* a hypothetical, imaginative novel that contains prophetic elements warning readers about the environmental threats affecting the future of New Caledonia, as it includes many characteristics common to dystopic novels of anticipation (such as environmental disaster).
3. Following World War II and the restructuring of the French colonial possessions during the French Fourth Republic, in 1946 New Caledonia, along with French Polynesia, became French overseas collectivities. The territory currently enjoys the unique status of *sui-generis* collectivity, the only French overseas collectivity of its kind. New Caledonia was added to the UN decolonization list in 1986, and is awaiting a referendum on the possibility of independence to take place between 2014 and 2018.
4. Jacques herself is not a Kanak writer, but rather a self-identified Caledonian of European origin. Raylene Ramsay has described her writing as engaging in cultural hybridity by writing European settlers not as one voice but as many, who themselves have also been victims of colonialist practices as many were forced to settle in New Caledonia during its period as a penal colony. Jacques, like fellow Caledonian writer Nicolas Kurtovitch, demonstrates that settlers also share Kanak communion with the land or even with Kanak ancestors, and often blends Kanak and European consciousness (Ramsay 258-59). Jacques not only lends a voice to Kanaks and Caledonians of European descent, but she also includes the voices of those even further marginalized in New Caledonia, such as Wallisians and Futunans and the squatters of the city of Nouméa.
5. The Nouméa Accords succeeded the Matignon Accords in 1998, acknowledged the Kanak as French citizens, and conceded even further recognition of Kanak land rights to the Kanak communities. Leah Horowitz notes, however, that New Caledonia does not have any legislation requiring royalties or compensation to be paid to customary landowners ("Daily" 37).

6. Critic Dominique Jouve argues that Jacques's novel of anticipation is an alternative (and an ironic) way for the author to recount history. See Jouve's article, "Conférence des historiens du Pacifique" ('Conference of Pacific Historians').

7. The deformed children born to the "savage women" in Jacques's fiction recall the "jellyfish babies," or the eyeless, limbless infants with transparent skin born to women in the Marshall Islands in the decades following U.S. nuclear testing. Nuclear testing took place in many areas of Oceania in the latter half of the twentieth century, including Mururoa and Fangataufa in French Polynesia as well as on the island of Kaho'olawe in Hawai'i. As Dominique Jouve observes, the names used throughout the text (Api, Abô, for example) and the lack of name for the island render the fictional future island ambiguous ("Conférence" n.pag.). We might therefore permit ourselves to read the novel as an allegory for the future of Oceania in a general sense. Indeed, the author includes references to environmental atrocities that have affected the entirety of the Pacific throughout the novel.

8. Leah Horowitz points out that in Melanesia, events are seldom considered accidents, but rather are believed to be caused by the agency of individuals ("Perceptions" 48). Jacques upholds traditional beliefs throughout the novel, frequently invoking the totems of the Pacific as well as myths and legends common to many Oceanic islands.

9. *Tertre* is defined as the place of origin or mound from which the genealogical pathways of a clan are traced (Sinclair-Reynolds 123).

10. Horowitz also points out that it is the responsibility of the first-occupant clan to communicate with ancestors, who can cause natural disasters or make the land sterile if they are displeased ("Perceptions" 242). She notes that during her research in the Voh-Koné area between 1998 and 2000, several Kanak clan members blamed the excessive rainfall and environmental pollution on the fact that the ancestors' permission had not been ceremonially requested. Jacques's novel, published during the beginning stages of the Koniambo Mining project, not coincidentally recalls many of the statements made by Kanak protesters of the mining project in Horowitz's studies.

11. It is worth noting that the city of Nouméa, often referred to as "la ville blanche" 'the white city,' was essentially off-limits to the autochthonous Kanak population until the 1946 abolition of the *Code de l'indigénat*, a set of laws that set up an inferior legal status for indigenous peoples of French colonies during the

late nineteenth century. Prior to this, Kanaks were considered “immigrant foreigners” in the colonial capital and only those authorized to work there were permitted to live in the city. “Squats” ‘shantytowns’, Jacques’s focus in *Nouméa mangrove*, were thus built up along the periphery of the city and are still largely inhabited by the autochthonous population. Since the abolition, the number of Kanaks living in the city has significantly increased, although the capital remains principally dominated by Europeans and Polynesian migrants. Christine Hamelin notes that the Kanak population of Nouméa represents the majority of those living in the areas with the least expensive rents, and the unemployment rate is much higher in Kanak neighborhoods than in the other “zones” of Nouméa (348).

12. The Goro Nickel plant is one of the largest nickel mining projects in the world. At the time of the publication of *Nouméa mangrove*, it was two years behind schedule. As of May 29, 2014, the plant was closed again, due to an acid leak that contaminated a local river, provoking an arson attack on the plant by local Kanak youths, which caused roughly \$20-30 million worth of damage (Home n.pag.).

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